

# "Pigs aren't meant to have fun":

the Swedishness of Swedish children's literature

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The title of my paper is a quotation from Astrid Lindgren's book *Emil and his clever pig* (1970). The little rascal Emil and his well-behaved sister Ida have taught their pet piglet to skip rope. One day, Emil's father, a sound and sensible Swedish peasant, sees Piggy-Beast skipping and is filled with indignation. Before he says anything, though, little Ida hurries to save the situation: "He thinks it's fun," whereupon the father comes with his splendid comment: "Pigs aren't meant to have fun." In Swedish children's literature, this retort is a perfect illustration of the typical Swedish attitude to life, in mainstream literature best reflected in the infamous Jante Law, proposed by the Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose in a novel from 1933.<sup>1</sup> It can be summarised as: "Don't think that you are worth anything." For many decades, the Swedish people seem to have lived according to this principle. This kind of national inferiority complex, paradoxically combined with a conviction that Sweden is the best country in the world, has naturally been reflected in their literature.

It is my firm belief, confirmed by profound socio-anthropological studies, that geographic, climatic, historical and social conditions of a country leave their marks on national mentality, and also influence the dominating themes, settings, figures, imagery, and attitudes in literature. Thus, in order to understand and appreciate Swedish children's literature, it is essential to have some basic knowledge about these conditions.



If you look at a map of the world you will see that Sweden is situated between latitudes which in other parts of the Earth would be considered uninhabitable. The cold, long and dark winter – in the Northern provinces of Sweden, the sun does not rise for half a year! – makes the Swedes melancholy, and the Swedish literature full of longing. In Swedish literature, from folktales to modern poetry, winter is directly associated with death. Quite a few literary works, for adults as well as for children, depict a dramatic snowstorm, as often as not also representing the protagonist's inner confusion and fears. This is a peculiarity of cultural typology; in countries nearer to the equator, the heat and drought are instead symbols of death.

If winter is dying, then spring is resurrection, the long waiting for spring brings gloom and longing, but also promise and hope. On the contrary, the short Nordic summer with its light nights and even, in upper latitudes, the midnight sun, is naturally a very special occasion for joy and celebration; the Swedish Midsummer Eve is literally the heyday of the year, recurrently portrayed in literature as a time of wild merrymaking. The culmination of quite a few Swedish children's books is the cheerful dancing round the Maypole, originally a symbol of fertility, but in children's literature simply a representation of unlimited happiness.

Indeed, the Swedes are obsessed by summer. In many children's books throughout the world, the summer vacation is the typical setting, but nowhere is the ecstatic delight of the first sunny day in June, the first flowers, the first strawberries, the first brief swim in an ice-cold pond or river felt as strongly. The heroine's recurrent spring shout in Astrid Lindgren's *Ronia the robber's daughter* (1981) may be seen as a representation of a Swede's yearly astonishment at being alive after the misery of winter. Ronia's winter isolation from her friend Birk becomes a powerful

symbol. We can also remember Pippi Longstocking escaping from the cold and dismal winter into the summer paradise of the Southern Seas. Naturally, this can be viewed on a symbolic level as a frantic attempt to retreat into the summer idyll of childhood. It is on return from the summer island to the cold and snowy Sweden that Pippi invites her friends to take the magical pill that will prevent them from growing up. It is even possible, as one of my students recently suggested, to interpret Pippi's adventures on the South Sea island as pure imagination, merely one of Pippi's many tall-tales, this time reflecting once again the Swedish longing for sun and the warmth of summer.

The drastic seasonal changes are the best reminder of the flow of time, of growing, aging, death and rebirth. Summer is brief and unreliable, it is inevitably followed by the dismal autumn and the long, gloomy winter.

Sweden is a large country, the third largest in area in Western Europe after France and Spain, but it only has a population of eight million, concentrated in larger coastal cities and in the southern parts of the protruded Scandinavian peninsula. This means that the density of population, especially in rural areas, is very low. Traditionally, the rural population of Sweden lived on separate farms rather than in villages or settlements, and a self-supporting family could practically live their whole life without meeting other people. In Astrid Lindgren's *Noisy Village* series (1947–1952), we encounter a closed, limited world of three cottages, three families, six children – three girls and three boys, in perfect harmony, where the big world outside is as far away as the moon. The characters of *The Noisy Village* do not, however, long for anything else; whereas in many other literary works this isolation creates anxiety, dissatisfaction, and grief.

At the same time, unlike the people of Central and Southern Europe, or still less, like the inhabitants of the New World, the Swedes are rooted, reluctant to move,

bound to their homes, their land, their relatives. Sweden of the 19th century was a backward, poor, agricultural country, unable, once again due to its climate and geography, to feed its growing population. During the period of 1850–1930, over one million Swedes emigrated – often quite unwillingly – to America, which in Swedish literature is often described as a tragedy rather than an optimistic promise of a new and better life. Still today, people of older generations are cautious about foreign people, customs, food; the spirit of adventure and discovery is alien to most of them. The whole American mythology of frontier life, expansion, and struggle for survival is thus unknown to Swedish mentality and is almost never found in Swedish children’s literature.

On the other hand, the sense of place, of belonging to a specific “little homeland”, is important. This results in many stories of the traumatic loss of home, for instance, in the works of Selma Lagerlöf; and in contemporary children’s literature, the pessimistic depictions of children moving into a new community. The passionate love of their country, which is in strong contrast to the inferiority complex mentioned earlier, is just one of many paradoxes of the Swedish national character. True, in Swedish children’s literature we will not find patriotic poems or stories like we see in Norway or Finland, two nations which gained independence as late as 1905 and 1917, respectively. However, the Swedish devotion to the land is clearly seen in the very themes and tone of books, the caring love of nature, mountains, forests, lakes and rivers. It is not accidental that the foremost classic of Swedish children’s literature, which has also become the bestknown Swedish book in the world, *The Wonderful adventures of Nils* (1906–1907), by the Nobel Prize winner Selma Lagerlöf, originally a school reader in geography, is permeated with pride of Sweden, its nature, its wildlife, and its people. The inevitable loss of contact with nature is felt in contemporary children’s novels,

with their frustrated urban protagonists, “children of the concrete.” The city as opposed to the countryside, especially in the teenage novel, is depicted as a threat, associating civilisation with an unfamiliar and unwelcome adulthood.

Culturally, Sweden is a minor nation, with a language hardly spoken outside its borders (and certain regions of Finland). With a few exceptions, like Selma Lagerlöf or Ingmar Bergman, Sweden has contributed little to world literature, drama, art, or music. This fact results in a cultural self-contempt of the Swedes, who are seldom aware and proud of their history and their cultural heritage. The rich intertextuality of contemporary children’s literature is often lost on young Swedish readers of today, since they do not carry in their cultural luggage the treasury of quotations and allusions which writers may wish to explore. A modern rewriting of *The Wonderful adventures of Nils*, by Sven Wernström, is based on the premise that the reader does not know anything about this major classic. Today’s young Swedes have lost their roots, their very sense of history, and thus their feeling of their place in history. To a certain extent this is the consequence of the radical 1970s, when the sense of “here and now”, the solidarity with struggle for independence in the third world, and great visions of the future forced aside the historical memory. Swedish writers of today have discovered this national amnesia, and genres such as historical novel, family chronicle, memoirs and biography are more popular than ever. Also in children’s literature, a new type of historical novel has appeared, focusing less on kings, leaders, battles and great events and more on the individual, and exploring the sources of national identity. Instead of being merely a spectacular setting, history in contemporary Swedish juvenile prose has become a metaphor of the present.

Once a great military power, and losing this position as far back in history as 1721, Sweden has been reduced to a back of beyond of Europe, which better

corresponds to its dimensions. The long-term policy of neutrality (terminated by Sweden's entrance into the European Union in 1995) has to a certain extent contributed to its anonymity, which, however, has not prevented the country from being internationally acknowledged in some specialised fields.

Further, Sweden has not been at war since 1814, almost a unique case in the world, and this fact has naturally also formed the mentality of the Swedes, making them psychologically unprepared for natural catastrophes, terrible accidents, like the wreck of the ferry "Estonia" in September 1994, as well as extreme acts of violence, like the murder of Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986. The very rare descriptions of the Second World War in Swedish children's literature are reduced to the mention of rationed coffee and fuel, or at most of the Finnish refugee children; and even the generation that lived during the war is often happily innocent about many events that took place outside the country. In the same manner, many Swedes today, even when they wish to engage in the darker aspects of life, are fairly ignorant about them. The impact on children's literature is, curiously enough, a *stronger* interest in misery, social deviations and conflicts, and in general a more pessimistic view of society.

The fact that Sweden did not participate in the Second World War accounts for much of its rapid industrial growth in the postwar decades, transforming the country into one of the best-developed in the world and raising the living standard to one of the highest in Europe. We must also regard this as one of the prerequisites of the explosive growth of children's literature after 1945. Having its industry intact after the war, the publishing industry included, Sweden could immediately see to the needs of its young readers, taking into account the new pedagogical and psychological views on childhood, developed during the 1930s. The year of 1945 is in Sweden considered to be the beginning of the era of modern children's

literature. Nineteen forty-five was the year of a mass debut of a number of children's writers who are still active today, like Tove Jansson, Lennart Hellsing, Hans Peterson, and Marta Sandwall-Bergström. They all contributed, each in their own way, to the creation of a contemporary children's literature in Sweden. Furthermore, 1945 was the year of the first *Pippi Longstocking* novel, and Astrid Lindgren's contribution to children's literature cannot be overestimated. Of course, Astrid Lindgren is an unparalleled genius, a unique talent impossible to imitate or otherwise exploit. It is difficult to point out any follower of hers among the younger generation of Swedish juvenile authors; but her impact on children's literature must be seen foremostly as creating an extraordinarily favourable climate, paving a path for a broad variety and freedom of genres and styles, and also raising the general status of children's literature.

The rapid change of the Swedish society during the 1950s and '60s had its dark sides. Industrialisation had inevitable consequences: the reorganisation of the population from rural into urban, and the disintegration of traditional family structures. The most welcome emancipation of women, resulting in almost one hundred percent of the women going out to work, had the negative impact of high divorce rates. The positive effects of extensive child care were counterbalanced by the alienation of children and parents, adjustment problems, and in addition, psychological disturbances of children and adolescents, alcoholism, drug addiction, violence, and suicide. The problems were naturally not worse than elsewhere, but by the middle of the 1960s, Swedish children's writers were painfully aware of them, which accounts for a particular social commitment of Swedish children's literature. Since the 1920s, an interest and profound knowledge of child psychology has been developed in Sweden. "The century of the child," proclaimed in 1900 by Ellen Key in a book of that title, did not only result in new educational systems, but also primarily in a deep respect for the child, which is manifest in

children's books. Although Astrid Lindgren has been given credit for unquestioningly taking the part of the child in her books, this feature had been present in Swedish children's literature long before, not least in *The Wonderful adventures of Nils*. What we see, however, in Astrid Lindgren's books, and what makes them subversive to the point of being revolutionary, is the questioning of authority, be it parents, school, or society at large. The pathos of *Pippi Longstocking* is the child's superiority over the grownups, but only partially due to Pippi's physical strength. In fact, Pippi is superior because of her spiritual and intellectual freedom, reflected also in her superb mastery of language, which unfortunately is practically lost in English translation. Pippi is the best reincarnation of the Romantic view of the child as pure, uncorrupt, and therefore omnipotent.

Children's literature in Sweden has always been far more democratic than in many other countries where books were written for and about middle- and upper-class children. The school reform of 1842 made elementary education obligatory, so that the vast majority of the population could actually read, and a number of excellent publishing endeavours at the turn of the century made books available even to the poorer families. Thus, the portrayal of poor orphans in *The Children of the moor* (1907) by Laura Fitinghoff was aimed at offering identity to young readers from the lower classes, rather than providing children from more well-off families with objects for compassion. The same year as *Pippi* (1945), another major children's classic, *Anna all alone* by Marta Sandwall-Bergström, was published. Although treated by some critics as a sentimental Cinderella-story (it does have similarities to *Oliver Twist* or *Sans famille*), the book has a strong democratic pathos and elements of social indignation, typical of the Swedish mainstream literature of the 1930s and 1940s. This empathy for the poor and the oppressed goes over quite naturally into a deep understanding of an emotionally underprivileged child.



By the middle of the 1960s, Swedish children's literature was filled to the brim with social issues: lonely, abandoned, insecure children, divorced parents, stepparents, unmarried mothers, alcoholic fathers, sibling rivalry, school problems, cruel comrades, and indifferent teachers. The dark side of reality entered the children's book. The most common feelings were fear and despair. Everything that had been taboo in children's literature suddenly made itself manifest.

One of the more serious questions treated in children's literature was the child's response to death. In Sweden of the 1960s and later, where most old people die in hospitals and the majority of the children never see a dead person, where the burial ceremony with a sealed coffin is cold, impersonal and abstract, and therefore the bereaved has no real chance to grieve, death becomes something alien and dreadful. Therefore it is more and more common that death and the child's contemplation of death appear as a secondary motif in some children's books while in others it becomes the central theme, reaching its climax in *Admission to the feast* (1969, also translated as *Nineteen is too young to die*) by Gunnel Beckman. It is a story of a young girl who learns that she has leukemia, written as letters to a friend, in imitation of a confused and unaffected personal style. The form allows a retrospective view of the events with a distance, a possibility for self-reflection. The narrative structure with the condensed time (a few days) and the unity of place, the direct, living language and the deep insight in the young character's situation makes this novel indeed outstanding.

The majority of Swedish children's and young adult novels of the 1960s and '70s show a deep psychological insight which is quite unique. For the new themes and subjects naturally demanded a new form, new poetics, new stylistic devices. Evidently the traditional narrative with an omniscient narrator was no longer

sufficient. Such a narrator could never penetrate into the child character's mind in the way the new subjects demanded.

For instance, in *Elvis and his secret* (1972) and sequels, Maria Gripe interprets the boy's thoughts and emotions and dresses them in a more advanced literary language making the impact all the stronger. Everything in the books is described not only through Elvis' eyes, but through his soul.

Another narrative device may be the diary or letter form. Fictitious diaries by Barbro Lindgren, published in the 1970s, were a step further towards a renewal of form and language in children's books. In many novels from the 1980s and '90s we see experimental forms combining first- and third-person narratives, multiple narrators, limited, strictly focalised point of view, complicated temporal structures, different metafictional frames, and in general showing more sophisticated narrative patterns than are usually met in children's books. The unreliable, nonironical first-person narrator, familiar from modern adult fiction, has become most common.

A characteristic stylistic feature is the abundant use of present tense in order to bridge the distance between the author and the reader, to make the reader experience the character's situation directly and strongly. In the Swedish language, the narrative present tense is generally less usual than in other languages and therefore more conspicuous as a stylistic device. In the American translation of *Elvis and his secret*, the present tense of the original is rendered into the past tense. Present tense narrative conveys a very intense, immediate and direct empathy, while the past tense creates a distance and alienation. I think that the translator's wilful substitution is not accidental, it is rather adapting the

Swedish intensity of emotion to American striving to spare the reader a too deep involvement.

The peculiarity of Swedish children's literature becomes still more evident as compared to American, just to take one example. While Swedish writers often explore the traumatic processes of passage from childhood to adulthood, American young readers seem to be much more oriented towards rationalism, everyday situations, comic events, down-to-earth problems, on the whole, towards material things, as Brian Attebery has noted in his study of American fantasy. Being a young, dynamic and expanding nation, raised on the national myth of a strong and active hero (Superman, the invincible cowboy, the brave cop), America favours characters who provide material wealth for themselves rather than gain spiritual knowledge and maturity. The "spirituality" of Swedish children's literature will probably be alien to young readers elsewhere.

In many contemporary Swedish children's books nothing really "happens", they develop slowly, and there is definitely no happy ending, hardly any ending at all. *Elvis and his secret* by Maria Gripe, mentioned earlier, and its sequel, *Elvis and his friends*, are very good illustrations. There is no plot in the traditional sense in these novels. There is no logical beginning, conflict and resolution, which is the normal structure of an epic narrative. We learn about the character's feelings and experience of events, but not about the events themselves. Epic narrative is disintegrating, it becomes what the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin calls polyphone, many-voiced. The omniscient, clever, commenting adult writer takes a step back and disappears.

Thus, the traditional epic plot of children's literature, described in many critical sources as "home – departure – adventure – homecoming", has in recent

Swedish children's literature been transformed into a search for identity. Most of the protagonists are extraordinary, alienated children or adolescents, who have problems in their contacts with the world around them. The spiritual quest is depicted through intensive friendship, often cross-sex friendship, where the friend of the opposite sex represents the missing parent. The books become less and less "realistic" or verisimilar, but can be seen more as symbolical representations of maturation, or, if one so wishes, the Jungian individuation process.

Not many books present any solution of the problems – the fulfilment of the Self. Most of them are isolated periods from a child's life. This disintegration of the plot has both advantages and disadvantages. It gives a feeling of a "real" life, but while the author sets a tentative stop at the end of a school year, at Christmas or a birthday, the posed questions remain unanswered. For many readers and critics, Swedish children's literature may thus seem hopelessly pessimistic.

It is especially true of the young adult novel which first appeared as a clearcut text type in the 1960s, went through a period of decline in the '80s and re-emerged with many innovations in the early '90s. JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the rye* (1951) is sometimes pointed out as a model; it was translated into Swedish in 1953. The Swedish young adult novel of the '60s was, typically, also described by the terms "socially critical", "problem-oriented", or "problem-realistic". The social commitment and problematic focus were apparent, and characteristic motifs were loneliness, exposure to the world of grownups; the teenager's conflict with the environment and with him or herself; the longing for something uncertain, felt in titles like *Where are you going? – Out* (1969) and its sequel *Where are you going? – Don't Know*<sup>2</sup> (1975) by Kerstin Thorvall. Other

aspects which had formerly been taboo were introduced into juvenile books: sex, violence, alcohol and drug addiction.

In the 1970s, the Swedish critics coined the concept of “utility literature”, that is, books which could be used practically to introduce urgent subjects for teenagers in school. Such a subject could be sexual relationships with their inevitable consequence of unwanted pregnancy, for instance in Gunnel Beckman’s *Mia alone* (1973), and still further – teenage parenthood as in *Peter’s baby* (1971) by Gun Jacobson. Gunnel Beckman’s books were at one time internationally acclaimed since they took the side of young people in their transitional period from teens to adulthood, discussed the problems of adolescence with unheard of candour, and showed a deep psychological insight into the minds of young protagonists.

The search for identity is as manifest in teenage novels as in children’s books, but it can of course be discussed on a different level. What should one do in search for one’s identity? If the surrounding world is corrupted and evil, if nothing is good, what is the point of going on living? Thus, the solution, if there is any, often lies in compromise and pain, or, at the extreme, in death or suicide. This cruel tendency has reached its peak in the novels by Peter Pohl, whose debut *Johnny my friend* (1985) has become a sort of a watershed in Swedish children’s literature in its evolution from social commitment towards a focus on an individual, towards imaginativeness and a higher literary quality. The open ending of Peter Pohl’s novels has by now become almost a cliché; still, it is undoubtedly a better alternative than ready solutions and authoritative comments.

As in many other things, Astrid Lindgren was in fact one of the first to introduce an open ending, aperture – as opposed to closure, into children’s

literature. In the fantasy novel *Mio, my son* (1954), she rejects the traditional happy ending and the basic pattern of all children's literature with a safe homecoming. She never brings Mio back to his own world as most fantasy authors did and still do; she lets him stay in the Faraway Land because nobody and nothing waits for him in his own world. Mio does not go on an adventure for its own sake, but because of his deep unhappiness in the "real" world. But the magical journey is not a helpless escape into daydreams; it is a psychodrama which makes the protagonist strong enough to cope with his inner problems. This, however, is not necessarily realised by young readers, since Astrid Lindgren makes her story so vivid and easy to believe in. To the child reader, an open ending is offered. The denouement is camouflaged by the fairy tale code, which deviates from the standard time framework. We may interpret it as we wish: whether Mio returns home – which he in his heart of hearts longs to do; whether the adventure has actually taken place or whether the boy has made it up in his imagination while in fact he is still sitting on a park bench when the book has ended. This kind of ending demands a great deal from the reader, and one of Astrid Lindgren's main strengths is her trust in the reader.

Almost twenty years later Astrid Lindgren ventured on a similar theme in *The Brothers Lionheart* (1973), where the force of the psychodrama is stressed by the shadow of death. This book was condemned by many critics outside Sweden as cruel and lacking in hope.

To summarise the specific traits of contemporary Swedish children's literature, it has gone a long way from the traditional epic story toward the complicated modern novel in the full sense of the word. The Swedish children's novel today is closer to mainstream literature than ever before. We can also notice the tangible convergence of genres, characteristic of the contemporary Western novel.

If we take a closer look at *Ronia the robber's daughter* by Astrid Lindgren we can state that no ordinary genre category will suit this book. As the title suggests, it is related to the robber novel tradition, to the adventure story with all its features like escape, quest, robinsonade, and so on, a real book for boys. But the main character is a girl, and the book often discusses the male and female stereotypes in family and society, in a way that many feminist authors could be envious of. It is also a typical fairy tale, which among other things depicts the miraculous birth. It is also a fantasy with supernatural creatures and events that threaten the idyll of childhood. It is also a historical novel with a correct description of the ways and tokens of the medieval period. It is also a love story with clear allusions to *Romeo and Juliet*. It is also a modern psychological family story of a father's relations with his adolescent daughter. It is a *Bildungsroman* as well, in the best Goethe-spirit, about a young person's breaking away from home, wandering, trials and final maturing. We see that Astrid Lindgren uses the old well-trying popular forms, but she moulds them into something radically new – a highly literary, complicated novel, not an adventure story, not a love story, but a novel.

The same is true of the best Swedish junior novel of the past decade, the above-mentioned *Johnny my friend* by Peter Pohl. It makes use of the superficial traits of a detective story, with a criminal mystery, with real and false threads which hold readers in suspense throughout the book. But it also carries features of a traditional school story, a traditional family story, of robinsonade, of fantasy and also of love story. Here too we have a mixture of traditional genres that result in a many-dimensional, psychological novel which can stand comparison with many books for adults.

In the 1980s many Swedish critics were both astonished and shocked by the series by Maria Gripe known under the common title of *Shadow* books, a typical

The two questions that arise from my arguments are the following. I began my paper by suggesting that children's literature in Sweden has been influenced by the geographical, historical, and social conditions of the country. Is the present state of Swedish children's literature really the consequence of these factors?

Second, is the Swedishness of Swedish children's literature a serious obstacle for its recognition outside the country? Swedish books for children have a very good world reputation thanks to Astrid Lindgren on the one hand, and a number of internationally acknowledged picture books, on the other. During the 1970s, many picture books by Gunilla Wolde reached far outside Sweden, filling the lack of simple, utilitarian everyday stories for the very young, like *Thomas goes to the dentist* and *Betsy's first day at day-care center*. Today, internationally most popular Swedish picture books are stories about Festus and Mercury by Sven Nordqvist: funny, dynamic, slapstick adventures, definitely originating from the comic-strip and animated-cartoon techniques. However, more sophisticated Swedish picture books, making use of postmodern narrative devices, based on extensive intertextuality, and devoid of action and adventure, like *Come into my night, come into my dream* (1978) by Stefan Mählqvist and Tord Nygren, seem to be less attractive. Picture books naturally have the best prerequisites to cross national boundaries; but Swedish picture books, praised in *The Oxford companion to children's literature* as being among the best in the world, have yet to fight for acceptance. The sophisticated novels have still more difficulties in reaching the international audience. Not because children outside Sweden are dumb or disinterested; but basically because adult mediators of children's literature have so far questioned the value of Swedish books.

Finally, I must make the necessary reservation that everything that I have said about Swedish children's literature is certainly true about some part of it, which



may be called quality literature, while there is of course a good deal of formula fiction and also quite a few mediocre as well as bad books. I am not suggesting that Swedish children's literature is better than other children's literature. However, because of all the peculiar circumstances discussed above, it seems to have gone further toward integration with mainstream literature. I am not sure that this development is desirable. This is something that I hope the future will show.

## Notes

- 1 Sandemose was a Norwegian author, Danish by birth, and his Jante Law is equally applicable in all three countries, as it seems.
- 2 Here and elsewhere titles in inverted commas indicate that the book has not been translated into English.

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# Oral tradition and children's literature:

facing the challenges of nation building

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## Introduction

All of us share the belief that children are our future. They must be watched closely and nurtured with love and care. Children need physical and emotional security, they need beauty and order, they need stability and change. A nation is built based on the seeds sown today. Prosperity of a country is based on the unity of its people.

Today many countries comprise different races, religious beliefs and culture. In this situation racial unity, religious tolerance and cultural understanding are the key ingredients in nation building. How can oral tradition and children's literature play their role in building a nation that can share a common destiny?

## Role of Oral Tradition

Oral tradition or folk literature is often conceived as children's literature to enthral children at bedtime. These traditional oral narratives such as myths,



legends, folktales, dramatic repertoires of traditional theatres, proverbs, riddles, oral sayings, dirges, magical spells, invocations and formulaic expressions in games and folksongs are not merely entertainment.

Some narratives play a straightforward function as an agent of socialisation for the young as well as the old especially in promoting positive norms and attitudes among its society. There is also a possibility that they also serve as an expression of protest or even licence for feelings or actions normally suppressed by the norms of the society.

As cultural phenomena, they are related to other aspects of culture, especially the belief system, the worldview and ethos for social values of society. The fabric of traditional society is held together by these narratives. Analysis of this literature can tell us many things about a culture. Unlike modern literature, these tales do not belong to anyone in particular but to the whole community. They are actually social manifestations.

As in many folk literatures, these narratives are usually about the supernatural origins and superhuman feats of the ancestors of the ruling dynasty. Studies of these stories have thrown a great deal of light onto the social values and social organisation of the societies concerned. Themes, plots and motifs in such tales show affinity with other cultures.

For example some of the tales are of adventures and love stories whereby the hero who will be seeking for something magical will have been victimised. During those days the hero who is usually the prince, king, princess or the queen is viewed as the symbol of prosperity and unity. Their happiness (happy endings)

provides good examples for the people. There is a “Cinderella” not only in France or China but also in other lands. Even “Taro and his Grandmother” or “Momotaro” exist outside Japan.

In the stories, good will always triumph over evil; “be good to others and others will be good to you” with many other positive values being cultivated among the people. Without realising it, people from all walks of life will always respect their kings and queens with dignity and will also try to perform good deeds and pledge their loyalty to their country and thus be responsible citizens.

### **Influence of children’s literature and nation building**

Today, we claim that our societies are becoming more sophisticated and complex. How can we build a nation of peace with strong moral and ethical values, ethnically integrated, living in harmony with loyalty and dedication to the nation? Can present day children’s literature contribute to the creation of racial unity, religious tolerance and cultural understanding?

Many have claimed that children’s literature can help to develop the sense, emotion, language, and personal, mental, emotional and spritual growth of children. We must, however, have the right materials for them to read and comprehend. Children’s literature is not purely an exercise for reading the words or for improving vocabulary. It is an agent of self-development among the young.

Literature for children is affected by the socio-political atmosphere, by the media and by the values and mores of the society. Children’s literature is a reflection of

the society. Society will influence children's books. We are concerned if there are negative values in the books for our children. Even though there is a belief that children are indiscriminate readers, studies have shown that books may indeed indoctrinate children in socially prescribed behaviour (Robinson 1994).

A study carried out in the USA in 1944, found that by exposing a group of junior high school students to books which presented blacks in a positive manner may cause them to have more positive attitudes towards blacks in general (*How books...* 1980). Miriam Bat-Ami (1994) stated that her four-year-old son cried when she read to him the book entitled *Hiroshima no pika* especially when he saw the illustrations of suffering in the book concerned.

Literature obviously has an effect on children. While looking for satisfying images, experiences and inspirations for their own creativity, indirectly they are subjected to "ideals and beliefs" of what they are reading. A good book will make the reader hear, feel and see in what is described as "aesthetic experience". Literature can nurture or harm the reader. A child being exposed to books on airplanes will definitely choose model airplanes as preferable toys. Books may help children build a concept of the society they live in and their role in society.

### **Multiculturalism**

Today, the term "multicultural literature" is widely propagated as a means to promote understanding and give children experiences from cultures other than their own. By encouraging understanding of the different backgrounds, it will thereby influence their decisions about how they will live in this culturally pluralistic world.

Michael Thomas Ford (1994) discusses the different perceptions of multicultural literature. Minorities felt that images portraying them have been stereotyped and an illustration of an African-American character appeared to be “too black”. Realistic, contemporary stories are a must in multicultural literature. Stereotypical images of immigrants belong to stories of the past. Literature showing the different peoples, cultures and beliefs is not enough to promote understanding. More stories should also portray that despite these differences, people are able to compromise and live with each other. Sensitivity to the different cultures and beliefs must be observed.

### **Malaysian national literature**

When Malaysia achieved her independence from the British on 31 August 1957 colonialism was a strong socio-cultural influence. With the advent of communication techniques and the media the country was also influenced by a universal culture imbued with Western ideas and values. Like many other developing countries with pluralistic societies Malaysia faces problems in her search for a national identity and in her attempts at nation building.

The people of Malaysia comprise indigenous groups, such as Malays, Ibans, Kadazans, Dayak, Bajaus and immigrant groups for example the Chinese and Indians. English language and literature which were foreign to both the indigenous and the immigrant groups, were the most influential means of linguistic and literary expression at one time.

The decision to adopt the Malay language as the national language was a momentous decision in the development of a Malaysian national literature. We



believe that when there is enough interaction between the various groups of people there will be an opportunity for the literature of each group to be known, especially if written in the national language.

It is realised that the formation of a Malaysian literature cannot materialise in a short time. Through the years the types of literature found in Malaysia still reflect the characteristics of the Malaysian population. The traditional literature of the immigrant groups consists of works brought over from their countries of origin. Meanwhile there are also works written in the new Malaysian environment.

### **Children's literature in Malaysia**

Malay children's literature began to be published as early as in 1924. In the seventies only about 200 books were published in the Malay language. However the content of these books is more relevant to the life of the Malays, since the authors were all Malays. There were not many elements of "pluralism". The characters in some of these books are very stereotyped – the Malays are farmers in the rice fields, the Chinese are businessmen and tin miners whilst the Indians work in rubber plantations.

Malaysian children's literature improved drastically in the mid-80s and the 90s. Authors and illustrators now came from different races and their works depict their environment. Not only do the illustrations in picture books portray a pluralistic society, but the stories, themes, characters, setting, and the style are more realistic and contemporary in nature and most important of all reflect the

multi-ethnicity of present day society. Malays and Indians are now also portrayed as businessmen and -women, and children of different races seeking adventure make the plots, themes and characters more colourful and realistic.

As an example, let us look at a picture book entitled *Bermain kereta api* (Playing with train) which was published in 1993. This book portrays children of different races playing a common game. You can identify the Malay boy by his eyes, the Chinese girl from her dress and the Indian girl by her hair. The book has a common message for all, there is a time for play and a time to go home.

Recently *Dewan Pelajar*, a monthly magazine popular among school children published a special publication commemorating its 25th anniversary. The content of the publication consists of poems, short stories written by children of different ethnic groups with photographs and illustrations showing people of different cultural backgrounds intermingling.

In connection with this paper, I visited three public libraries asking children between the ages of 10 and 12 what kind of stories they like. I interviewed about 30 children from the three different races – that is Malays, Chinese and Indians – at each library. Books in the library collection are in English, Malay and other vernacular languages. I was interested to find out about language preference. Although Malay is the national language, there is also an emphasis on the English language.

Over 80 percent of the respondents prefer to read story books in the Malay language. When they were asked why, most of them answered that they like reading in Malay, because they are familiar with the language; they could relate to the characters and they feel the settings of the stories are familiar to them.

Since there were many translated works of popular series, like the *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* in Malay, I also asked whether children liked them. Most of them prefer to read books written originally in Malay because for them, the settings in the translated books are foreign. I also found out that they do not like reading in English because they find some of the vocabulary is difficult.

One bright Indian boy said to me “by reading books written in Malay not only will I improve my Malay language but they also help me to understand that we must live in a harmonious society and that there are different races living peacefully in Malaysia”.

What about the 20 percent that prefer to read in English? I found them competent in the English language, they speak English at home and most of them said that the plots of story books in English were more interesting. For them it does not matter whether the characters or settings in the story are Malaysian. As long as “the story is interesting”.

Literature written for children in Malaysia does depict reality and promote racial integration. I used to hear comments that the Malaysian Chinese are different from the Chinese in Singapore or Hong Kong. Of course they are different because they live, understand, and have adopted the different values and cultures of the other races in Malaysia.

## **Conclusion**

What do these findings suggest? I believe literature is one of the most important cultural expressions in the process of social and cultural integration at national

and international level. By reading stories children understand more about other cultures, other races, other religions. Children's literature can play a significant part in national unity and nation building. We in Malaysia have gone through racial clashes in the 60s. Certain people in the world are still at war thus the children of these countries are continuously suffering and unable to learn how to understand humankind.

Economic growth cannot be achieved without stability, peace and harmony in a country. Children must be nurtured, and cooperation from all is needed for racial integration and to teach tolerance of different religious beliefs and cultures.

Today the government is encouraging people to master the English language. I believe this is possible not only by reading literature published in English in countries where English is the mother tongue, but also by publishing and reading more Malaysian literature in English with its reflection of a pluralistic environment.

I believe that literature is vital for children to develop a sense of their own identity, positive self-image and the pride of cultural heritage (as advocated by many children's literature experts). It is also important that through literature they must be made aware of their neighbours, their schoolmates and also the different peoples of the world and learn to appreciate and respect them. The settings, characters and names may be different but the themes, the message, the hopes, the feelings, the dreams are similar.

Like adults, children read for many reasons: to learn, to dream, to enjoy, to explore both the familiar and unknown. What they read they absorb. What they

have absorbed may help shape their perceptions of other people and contribute to their self-understanding. What we need is for children to understand and respect each other irrespective of race, colour, beliefs and cultural background. I believe in the potential of literature for children not only to make them aware of the pluralistic society around them but to help them understand the people of the universe. God has created us equal and literature can help in fostering understanding and maintaining peace.

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# Children's literature in Cameroon

edward o ako



I came to realise as soon as I had a child of my own growing up, that the question of education for children in Africa was really very complex. Especially for those of us you might call the middle class, who are not in the villages. We are at cosmopolitan centres, and the predominant culture of those centres is from Europe. And so, whatever your own political or ideological position might be, you very soon discover that your child is inheriting all kinds of nefarious ideas about race, about colour and so on (Chinweizu 1981:23).

Children's literature, it has been generally acknowledged, is something of a new phenomenon in Africa<sup>1</sup>. Even when a few texts do exist, they are generally ill-suited for the African child and do not fulfil the role such literature is meant to fulfil. A number of writers in the African continent are fully aware of the value of this literature and are making an effort to fill the void. Some critics are also lending a hand at the birth of this literary genre by critically evaluating the works which are already available.

One such critic is the Nigerian Mabel D Segun. In her article "Children's literature in Africa: problems and prospects", she quotes Nancy Schmidt who comments on the 20 years of African children's literature from Ghana's independence to 1987. Schmidt's comment runs thus:

In 1987 the typical children's book is markedly different from the typical children's book of 1957. It is written by an African artist, edited and published by Africans in

Africa. The context is almost always African, usually specific to the African country or geographical region in which it is published. Folklore includes stylistic features of oral literature to the extent that this is possible in print.

Illustrations depict African people in African settings and are more often in colour than they were in 1957.

Although most books are didactic, as they were in 1957, they are not single-mindedly didactic to the point of excluding creativity and stimulating writing for pleasure.

Although some Europeans still write, illustrate, edit and publish books for African children, most of them live or have lived in Africa and are familiar with contemporary African life (Segun 1992:27).

Still along the lines of the evolution and growth of this literature, Segun herself adds: "Most of the books published in Africa come from four countries: Nigeria with about one hundred publishers, followed by Kenya, then Ghana and Cameroon" (Segun 1992:27). In the 18 page essay, she makes no reference to a work of children's literature in Cameroon. The present essay should therefore be regarded as an attempt to throw some light on literature for children in Cameroon. It shall examine the three genres: the novel, poetry and drama.<sup>2</sup>

But before we move to a discussion of the genres, a few words need to be said about the value of children's literature. At the beginning of this essay, we cited a statement by Chinua Achebe in which he explains how and why he got interested in writing for children. In his article "Children's literature in Africa: myth or reality", Ahukanna (1989:48) argues that this kind of literature could be "one of the powerful tools that the school could use to inculcate values, develop skills, influence attitudes and affect physical, social, emotional, intellectual and moral development". Mabel Segun makes the same point when she states that "work ethics, selflessness, loving relationships, acceptance of responsibility are a few of

the values which can be taught through literature, not in a didactic off-putting manner, but with subtlety so that children can be mobilised towards national and international development” (*Children and literature in Africa*:32). In my discussion, we shall see to what extent the various texts fulfil some of these requirements.

## Prose

Comparatively speaking, children’s literature first manifested itself through the medium of prose with Sankie Maimo’s *Adventuring with Jaja* (1962)<sup>3</sup>. Patterned after Mark Twain’s *Tom Sawyer*, it deals with the adventures of a group of young men playing at being grown-ups, always talking of “the days of yore” or of “glorious times now lost”. The characters, who belong to a kind of worldwide youth movement, are mainly from Nigeria and Cameroon as their names testify: Aduba, Jaja, Kayode, Tita, Kefi, Tunde, Baye, Awo and Ako. The work has no clear-cut plot as such. What holds it together are the various episodes. From the very outset of the novel, the author clearly states that his objective is to “provide the young at heart with a work of adventure with a strictly local background”. As I pointed out earlier, *Adventuring with Jaja* is Tom Sawyer in tropical Africa.

If youth is a necessary stage in everyone’s life, one must nevertheless learn to make the transition from childhood and adolescence to manhood. Kayode, the main narrator, like Voltaire’s *Candide*, realises that one must cultivate one’s garden. And so, he realises that to continue “adventuring ... was to ask for unnecessary and untold troubles” (Maimo 1974:87). Consequently, the following morning “he sat up in bed in wonder. With the song of birds outside and light streaming into the room, it looked all very pleasant. The light caressed me with



its kindly glow. This was an invitation to an active life. Now my adventures were over” (Maimo 1974:87).

It was well over a decade later that the next prose work was to appear. This was Kenjo Jumbam’s *Lukong and the leopard and The White man of cattle* (1975). From the point of view of craftsmanship, Jumbam’s novel is probably the best prose work produced for children. It lays emphasis on the values held dear by the Nso people: manhood, the pride of being Nso, the importance of obeying one’s parents, et cetera. The author no doubt expects his work to serve as a vehicle for the transmission of cultural values. Since there is emphasis on manhood, he goes on at length to explain what men do or are expected to do. On one occasion the reader is told:

the Banso people are always armed when they go on a journey. A man usually carries a spear and a cutlass, and if he can afford it, he carries a gun. The men always wear caps on their heads except when they are mourning. That is the mark of an adult, of a man. When they meet a Fai, or any other traditional ruler, he waits; they disarm and greet him, then they may begin to talk (Jumbam 1975:30).

A little later, we are equally told that, to go into the Fon’s palace, the people “disarmed themselves, putting their spears and guns against the wall and hanging their cutlasses and bags on the nails in the wall. That was the custom. Everybody who went there was expected to comply” (Jumbam 1975:31).

If Kenjo Jumbam’s *The White man of cattle* is set in Nso country, Nsanda Eba’s *The Good foot* is set in one of the Cameroon Development Corporation Camps in the then Southern Cameroons. In several ways, it is a faithful record of the everyday life of labourers in a plantation, seen through the consciousness of an intelligent young boy. It also raises the issue of appropriate reading material for the young school child. Of the school experiences then in the early fifties, the narrator says:

School was such fun, even work was pleasant; but above all the marching and singing. The teacher taught many nursery rhymes, although very inappropriate for Africa, most of all for Bantem. But the melodies were good, and that was what mattered. You could always hear the school the good distance away, singing:

Hot cross-buns

Hot cross buns!

One a penny, two a penny

hot cross buns!

Nobody knew the exact words, not even the teacher.

But the melody was good, and that was what mattered

(Eba 1977:24).

Drawing his inspiration from Bertha M Clay, George Che Atanga's *The Last of the virgins*, dwells on the power of love and is the narrative of Evelyn Ndangeh's love for Lesley Njapa. It is a work bound to appeal to young readers. The author gives free rein to his imagination and does not seem at all perturbed by the numerous unrealistic elements. The main weakness of this work, it seems to me, is the very poor use of language. Just one example will suffice:

He thus expected me to offer sexual satisfaction before he could love me wholly. This was very uncompromising with me and I knew that even if I satisfied him this way, the situation would not be different for he was a lover of too many girls, all of whom he promised marriage (Atanga 1986:54).

In the same vein as Nsanda Eba's *The Good foot*, Comfort Ashu's *Ayamoh's days at school* is the record of a young boy's last days in primary school and his stay in secondary school. Besides being the account of a growing child's life, the book explains and occasionally justifies certain values of the tradition. These, no doubt, are meant to be passed on to the younger generation. Among other things, we are told that wives have to obey their husbands (Ashu 1987:13).

When the whole family gathers to bid Ayamoh farewell, we are told:

According to tradition, the hot drinks could not be taken without first informing the ancestors using one of the bottles of whisky. There was no doubt that Ta-Tarh knew what was expected of him. He opened the bottle and carried it in his left hand to the entrance of the house. He poured the drink on the ground and at the same time called on his ancestors. "Ta Mbeng, Ta Ndip, Ta-Mbu, Ta Agbor and all other important personalities in your world of the dead, I call on you to share in the cup that we are about to drink. We are gathered here to send off Ayuk's first son who has been accepted at a secondary school far away from home. We call on you to share in our discussions as you share in our drinks, and we ask for wisdom, prosperity and more children" (Ashu 1987:22).

Joseph A Ngongwikwo's three prose works: *The Lost child*, *Taboo love* and *Taboo kingdom* are marred by poor editorial work. Still, like the other works, they try to pass on aspects of Cameroonian culture to the young, in this particular case, of Kom culture. Curiously, though, they are a kind of apology of both Western civilisation and especially, of the Catholic church. As concerns cultural values, the opening page of *Taboo kingdom* gets the reader right into the heart of the matter. When Bobe Su helps Nawain Bi with her basket of corn and a big bundle of firewood, she tells him:

Since I became pregnant no one has helped me the way you did today. I do not know. This is my last month. If I get a girl child, she is your wife; but if a boy, you will come down to the house and eat your meal of foo-foo corn and egusi soup, when the child is born. Now you know the house. It is your house. Before we see the next new moon, this stomach should be empty.

And the narrator adds:

Bobe Su knew the tradition of the people of the tribe. He had helped a pregnant mother and this favour had earned him a future wife (Ngongwiko 19?:1).

## Poetry

Along with prose, poetry is one of the other areas in which the literary production for children is quite encouraging. Besides Kenjo Jumbam and Comfort Ashu, Takere Mesack, Jacob A Ndifon and Bitame Lucia Bikaku have produced collections of poetry for children. Of these five, we shall discuss the works of Takere Mesack, Jacob A Ndifon and Bitame Lucia.

If others came into writing poetry for children by accident or simply as a passing fancy, Takere Mesack had a very clear idea of what he was after. His *Kingfisher poetry: junior verse* is so well illustrated with bright colours that it automatically catches a child's attention. Besides paying attention to the aesthetics of the text, the author announces from the outset the educational value of his work for young children. In his dedication, he declares:

This offer I make in true dedication,  
For moral formation of springing tender young  
And reformation of some adults in daily life,  
Who, for reasons far beyond my own scope,  
Were victims of some ill-process of growing up (Mesack 1982:1).

Though some of the poems in the collection are important mainly because of their rhythmic pattern which makes it easy to commit them to memory, most of them deal with important social issues. In "Pom-Pumpkin-Pom" the repetition of the first verse in each of the five stanzas as well as the refrain, make the poem easy to recite.

We saw our lovely pumpkin  
In round and greenish gray  
Fresh from mother's own farm  
Worked behind the hills.

Angum, Abit, Anim and I,  
In joyful song we sang  
Pom-Pumpkin-Pom.

We saw our lovely pumpkin  
In round and greenish gray  
Mother sliced him in pieces  
To cook him in the pot

Angum, Abit, Anim and I  
In joyful song we sang  
Pom-Pumpkin-Pom (Mesack 1982:4).

In such poems as “These things”, “My country” and “Devotion”, the poet extols the love of fatherland. In “My country” we hear the chant:

I pledge to you my country,  
A faith strong in loyalty  
To uphold truth and unity  
In honour and responsibility.

I pledge to you my country,  
My precious blood to even spill  
In defence of green, red and yellow  
And the star that forever shines (Mesack 1982:41).



Determination and hard work are emphasised in the poem “Laziness”. Using the well-known story of the lizard, to illustrate his point, he states:

There once lived a lizard,  
In gay and happy mood,  
Sprawling upon each rock  
To spend his day in warmth.

He loved this luxury life  
And forgot his other problem.  
When night did fall at last,  
He felt so awefully (sic) cold.

He wished he'd gathered twigs  
To kindle a fire at night  
This he swore to do at dawn,  
But the sun soon rose again.

And of course, the lizard never learnt his lesson. And then the admonition:

You see lizard in a predicament,  
In luxury warmth and misery cold,  
Ever putting off till tomorrow  
What he ought to do today (Mesack 1982:25).

Like in Takere Mesack's *Kingfisher poetry Book I*, Jacob A Ndifon's *Integrated rhymes* (For Beginners of English in Cameroon) pays a lot of attention to the aesthetics of the text. More attention is paid to the mnemonic nature of the poems, than to any need to teach any moral lessons. Of those writing poetry for children, he is probably the only one with an ear for rhythm.

In "The Baby, the poet writes:

Akwi the baby  
Plays with a toy  
She's bouncing  
And laughing  
And shouting  
With joy (Ndifon 1984:7).

In "The Fish", the use of alternating rhymes, assonance and alliteration, make the poem a real pleasure for children. It goes thus:

Rise little fish  
Swim swim to me  
Dive little fish  
Down under the sea (Ndifon 1984:9).

In "Moon-Light dance", the poet once more shows his skill at the use of poetic devices. The sound of the drum seems to rise from the pages:

In a moon-lit night we clap  
As we run about and shout  
Jumping high to touch the sky  
Running into the house and out  
Twisting, dancing on our toes  
While the drummer's music flows (Ndifon 1982:40).

Of the three collections of poetry under discussion, Bitame's *Environmental poems and nursery rhymes for primary schools*, exhibits ambition rather than talent. Most of the poems in the anthology actually deal with the Cameroonian environment and are meant to help the young Cameroonian master his or her history and culture; the effort does not quite pay off since she does not seem to have a firm grasp of her chosen medium of expression.

## **Drama**

In the area of theatre, only Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh has, so far, tried to use this medium of literary expression for children. His Yaounde Children's Theatre Collective was founded in October 1989, "more by accident than by design, following an invitation received from the organisers of the First World Festival of Children's Theatre which was held in Lingen, Germany, in April 1990" ("Children's Theatre in Cameroon: some experiences":1). The two plays the theatre group has performed to date are *Munyenge* (1990) and *The Magic fruit* (1990).

Though the author developed an interest in theatre for children by accident, once he got started, things became clear in his mind. As a child, he states that he had not “read children’s literature beyond the Cinderella stories”. He goes on to add: “I found these inadequate for the children I was working with and decided to choose Cameroonian lore as a starting point, and this perhaps because of the need for a cultural identity of our own”. Besides the entertainment, he saw this kind of literature as something very useful and important. He states his case thus:

The child is said to be father of the man. If literature must grow, if enjoyment of literature should develop, if new creators of literature have to be born, then literature should begin with the child ... it expands the child’s linguistic competence, develops his creativity, provides him with entertainment, and provides him with a perception of his world (Interview with H.N.E.:1).<sup>4</sup>

His first play, *Munyenge* (1990), draws its inspiration from a well-known folk-tale: that of the self-willed young girl who stubbornly insists on picking a husband of her choice and who ends up marrying a skull. The author weaves his tale in such a way that the young girl, *Munyenge*, is rescued at the last minute and ends up marrying her childhood love.

In *Munyenge*, the author does more than just retell a well-known tale. The other issues raised in the play are those of the conflict between generations, the battle of the sexes and oppression. Thus, though the play is meant for children, it also appeals to adults. *Munyenge*’s father, who is also the Chief of the village, muses out loud:

In our days, men were men ... and children were children.  
Just look at them now. Foolish, stupid,  
rebellious, noisy ...  
yes ... AND IRRESPONSIBLE (Eyoh 1990:4).



In pushing his daughter to pick a husband, the Chief claims that he simply wants her to select a husband in “a democratic manner”. In spite of this, the Chief seems to be everything except a democrat. Of him, the first villager says:

He has his ears and eyes everywhere. I  
cannot even speak about him in the presence  
of my wife (Eyoh 1990:5).

If Munyenge is dismissed by her father as belonging to the new generation of irresponsible children, she on her part, does not think much of him and of his sex. To her, men are “unreliable, fake, dishonest, hypocritical” (Eyoh 1990:12).

And if for the Chief, Munyenge and his brother Mukete are made of the same stuff, Mukete distances himself from his sister, by placing the mountain of sex between them. He says to his sister: “your problem is that you think too much for a woman” (12). To which she later ironically retorts: “They command, the rest of us obey” (Eyoh 1990:14).

Eyoh’s other play, *The Magic fruit*, like *Munyenge* draws its inspiration from folklore. The play deals with the problems of a polygamous home in which each of the mothers tries to place her son in a position to inherit the father’s property. The play functions as a musical comedy. The popular children’s songs interspersed throughout the play clearly show that the author has a keen ear and the ability to enter into the inner being of the characters, whatever their ages.

In the work, Mother One who had abandoned her husband and children, returns after his death to get his son back to their village because “getting my son back home means that he can inherit his father’s throne” (10). But, because there is a curse on Mother One’s family, only the son of Mother Two, can aspire to the throne.

Throughout the play, the children express the desire to return home, but above all to be good, for:

... goodness, not badness  
will take you to the heights (9).

This idea of goodness, and along with it, kindness and fairness is reiterated in the story the Uncle tells at the end of the play, and which gives its title to the play. The story concerns a village which was blighted and whose inhabitants were plunged into misery and hunger. The children, in search of food, saw a squirrel eating a nut. They ran after it; it disappeared into a hole, they followed and found themselves in a “beautiful city full of squirrels”.

There they ate a lot and wanted to carry some of the food home. The Chief Squirrel thought of something else. He gave them “a magic fruit and also gave them a wand”. And with this, the villagers had enough food for everyone for many years. Then one day, the magic wand and the magic fruit disappeared. On investigation, it was found out that it was the village Chief who had stolen the wand and the fruit. And so, “the people collected their fruit and their wand and chased the Chief out of their village” (27).

The intent of the story becomes very clear. The newly installed Chief must think of the overall welfare of his people rather than just that of his immediate family. Given what is going on in most of the African continent today, this message needs to be driven into the heads of today’s children who are, after all, tomorrow’s leaders.

This survey shows that those writers who have chosen to write for children intend, among other things, to educate and to inculcate certain cultural values in

these children. They do this with varying degrees of success and of commitment. It is up to critics to seek out and to give this budding literature, the attention it deserves.

## Notes

- 1 To show the extent to which children's literature has been ignored, Richard Bjornson's authoritative *The African quest for freedom and identity: Cameroonian writing and the national Experience*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991 and the recently published *Cameroon Anglophone writing* (1993) make no reference whatsoever to children's literature.
- 2 This essay is concerned with children's literature in Cameroon, written in English. The works written in French will be the subject of a separate study.
- 3 The Cameroon edition of Sankie Maimo's *Adventuring with Jaja* appeared in 1974. Though the work is set in Nigeria and most of the characters are Yorubas, it does not figure in any discussion of children's literature in Nigeria.
- 4 The interview with Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh was conducted in February 1993.

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